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Interview with Susan Collins

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ondon-based artist Susan Collins studied in London and Chicago and is well-known for her early online interactive installation "In Conversation" (1997) and her web commission "Tate in Space" (2002). Her work was included in an exhibition called "Timeless: Time, Landscape, New Media" as part of the Images Festival at Harbourfront Center in 2006, and in "Outlook Express(ed)" at Oakville Art Galleries in 2007. In August of 2009, I joined her in her garden in Whitby, an English seaside town where she spends her summers and where she is currently working on a short film commission for Animate Projects about the regeneration of seaside towns. As seagulls squawked overhead I asked her about her recent series of seascapes.

Sarah Cook: *I wanted to start by asking you about the direction your work has taken of late, and how you got to the "Seascape" project seen in your exhibition at the De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea (2009), from the landscapes you had been making using web-cameras looking over remote locations a few years ago, such as "Fenlandia" (2004-5) and "Glenlandia" (2005-7). We should state at the outset that your work is produced pixel-by-pixel through an automatic process of capturing images from an Internet-enabled network camera, which are then relayed to a server and compiled into live-updating images viewable either onscreen, projected into a gallery space, or as digital prints.*

Susan Collins: When I was working on "Fenlandia" in Cambridgeshire [an area also known as Silicon Fen] half way through the year the camera was in place, a tree in the left of the image disappeared. I got in touch with the coaching inn where the camera was located and they told me they had suffered some subsidence, and that the ground was unstable and so they had to chop the tree down. What resulted was that instead of a traditional landscape image, with tree, the images without tree became more abstract, like colour-field pictures. All the images before were picturesque and charming, the ones after were beautiful, but more bleak, and in many ways more representative of the fens.

I was interested in this process of image construction, that while the source for the image may come from a landscape, the image has the potential to become something else in its own right.

In 2006, I was in Melbourne in a residency at Monash University when I had a random conversation about Australian surf cams,

and began exploring the ones around Victoria. I began stealing images from these 'found' surf cams, applying my pixel-by-pixel process which resulted in quite blue, abstract compositions. When an opportunity came up to make work for the gallery at the De La Warr Pavilion, an iconic Modernist building overlooking the sea, I was immediately interested (in part because I grew up on the same stretch of coastline), and once there, it was clear how to approach the project: it had to have five cameras (3 would be too few, 7 too many), fanning out across the coast, with the De La Warr in the centre, and the live updating pixel seascapes video-projected against the windows with the live coastline as the backdrop.

This last idea came from Marnie Fleming's suggestion when showing "Glenlandia" at Oakville Galleries to project it in a window against the backdrop of Lake Ontario and the gallery gardens, so that Scotland was collaged over Canada. Bringing the spaces together enriched the image conceptually (and visually) and made time even more evident.

S.C.: *So perhaps we should step back a moment and you can tell me about "Seascape" technically, how the images work.*

S.C.: The first thing was to find locations for each of the cameras. I did a tour of the South East Coast, not looking for the ideal image but rather ideal vantage points for the cameras and then negotiating with the host locations which are vital to the project. For "Seascape" two cameras are in private houses, one is in an entertainment hall, one is in the De La Warr Pavilion itself, and the most westerly one is in a beach café. Later, in framing the images for the seascapes, I chose very deliberately, in seeking the potential for abstraction, to leave out harbour walls, or things that could be seen as picturesque.

They are all network cameras–which are able to send live images to a series of dedicated servers in London, where the pixel software is located, and where the images are woven together. The seascapes update each pixel every third of a second, from top to bottom of the image, and left to right continuously. Each pixelated (compiled) image is saved every five minutes. These complete images are then sent to a separate server for the project website where viewers can scroll backwards and forwards in time through the image archives for each location.

S.C.: *Tell me more about the timings of "Seascape" compared to the images of the landscapes where you had one pixel per second, and the images took about 24 hours to completely refresh. Here the seascapes refresh much more quickly.*

S.C.: I am currently working to the limits of the speed of the technology so the images are very low resolution, 320 x 240, in order that they can be transmitted over the network fast enough. It made sense to do a pixel a second for the landscapes, which comes out at just under a day (about 21 hours) for the image to complete and begin rewriting itself. There is a band of black in each of the landscape images which shows night-time (it becomes larger and smaller depending on the time of year).

S.C.: *But why did you change the timings?*

S.C.: The sea is another beast entirely and in seeking the potential for abstraction, the seascape images deliberately are quite evacuated, with sea and sky becoming almost interchangeable. I knew if I followed the same time frame as the landscapes that all the images would have a band of black in them, and that would end up dominating the compositions.

And then I remembered that early in "Fenlandia" there had been a bug in a programme where the images updated as fast as they

could. These appeared almost as 'time slip' images and I found them interesting, and had always planned to do more with that. So I thought I would see what happened if I let the seascapes go as fast as they could. The speed fluctuates between servers but they take between 6 and 7 hours each to complete an image, which is nearly the same time it takes for the tide to go in and out. I was lucky that the timings were similar. I haven't done anything clever, I just set them to go as fast as they can, ebbing and flowing in tandem with the tides.

S.C.: *I've researched artists' uses of technology to simulate lived experience, so now I have to ask, are the seascapes simulations?*

I think the works are about observation, not simulation but representation. I gave a talk recently and someone said, "But it's not reality!" I replied that it is reality but not as you see it. It's time shifted. You're seeing six or so hours all in one frame. In "Glenlandia" you occasionally saw the moon moving through the sky – appearing onscreen as a white streak. You immediately get a sense of the movement of the earth and all those things you know but you don't see visualized in that way. The process of making these images reveals some things but completely misses others. For instance, a lightning storm might create a few turbulent pixels. You never get a sense of a rough sea, of rolling waves, because it is very linear and straightforward in the way that it captures and updates the image. It is like a scientific instrument that isn't swayed from its course.

S.C.: *But that is exactly why I would call the works simulations because of the time shifting. In simulation you set up a scenario, take out a variable, and then let it play out–the recorded data of an entire life-cycle of fish on a coral reef played out in a ten minute computer model, let's say, to see if you can identify a pattern, or notice another variable.*

S.C.: Yes, but this is live imagery, not recorded. So you can see a parallel between observed and lived experience. I admit, I am interested in variables, which may be what connects "Seascape" to my earlier work. In those pieces, such as "In Conversation" or "Transporting Skies" people and their behaviour were the variables. In both I created an architecture to see how the work unfolds over time. However while that work was quite performative–almost choreographed with passersby acting out within parameters I had set up in space over time–in these automatic landscape works, I am instead working with the elements, such as the weather and the sun, as my variables.

S.C.: *This would lead me to suggest that the seascapes are closer to being*

algorithmic cinema or what Lev Manovich might call database cinema. Do you think of "Seascape" as cinema or as static?

S.C.: Both. Before I wouldn't have thought of the still as a single piece of work. But in this work I see both–the live updating video image and the still compiled images–existing quite independently, which has allowed me to show them in the same exhibition.

It's a very different way of looking. When looking at the live image there is an active engagement. The 'now moment' is constantly moving, it is in flux. It is both a still image and it is constantly changing. With the stills, the prints, they become more contemplative as you are not constantly seeking the moving pixel. You can decode them, see the colour of each individual pixel, recognise them as moments in time.

S.C.: *It seems as though there are numerous iterative processes at play in your work, which suggests how your work has built up over time as technologies have changed and developed also.*

S.C.: That's true I suppose however, previously, every work I made would learn from earlier works, but become a completely new piece of work in itself, whereas the pixel landscapes and seascapes I am not quite finished with. It has been maturing to me as an artist to spend more time with this work, develop it in greater depth and not just move on. I was initially concerned that the seascapes would just be another iteration of the landscapes. A big reason for changing the timescale was to have a new reason to do it, above and beyond the landscape work, to find new forms and to take it to another level. One of the nice things about developing the work organically over time is that you can build on technological developments so that by the time I made "Seascape" I could raise the level of ambition in the work both in terms of scale but also presentation.

I have a possibility later this year to do something in Sao Paolo Brazil which could be very exciting, but for me it is not enough to think "that's an interesting view!" I want to know what I'm going to get from it that would add something or reveal something that wouldn't be revealed otherwise.

INTERVIEW BY SARAH COOK

Seascape at the De LaWarr Pavilion. Photo Credit: Joe Clark.